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10 March 1960

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Prospects in Laos

1. In Laos political and economic affairs continue to revolve around the 24 April national elections. An electoral structure favorable, in so far as paper work can make it so, for a conservative victory has been created, and the conservatives appear to have negotiated a single slate of candidates for most electoral districts. If the elections follow a normal and peaceful course the conservatives would probably win a substantial majority of the 59 seats.

2. However, this reckons without possible Communist courses of action. The Pathet Lao can now operate at will in many rural areas throughout Laos. We believe that Pathet Lao armed strength is greater than six months ago and is considerably greater than the Laotian leaders appear to believe it is. If they decide to do so, the Communists could probably so disrupt the countryside

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by armed action and terrorism that elections could be held only in the major towns, thereby discrediting the elections or causing them to be postponed.

3. Radio broadcasts from Beijing and Hanoi have denounced the new Election Law, demanded the release of the jailed Ho Chi Minh Sat (HCMS) leaders and their freedom to participate in the elections, and have demanded UN supervision of the elections. However, at present it appears that the Communists intend to compete in the elections. The HCMS has indicated an intention to file candidates and a number of Communist-controlled independents and members of the Pantiphab party will almost certainly run. At any time in the course of the campaign the Communists could boycott or, by guerrilla action, seriously disrupt the elections. There is a good chance that they would make such a decision if their campaign effort is seriously hampered or their candidates appear to be running poorly.

4. On balance, we believe it most likely that the Communists will protest and denounce the elections and in some areas prevent them from being held, but not withdraw from the campaign or boycott the elections, particularly if they believe that they will win a

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number (10-15) of seats in the Assembly. From the Communist viewpoint this would enable them to make use of their Neo Lao Hak Sat organization on the legal, political front, while continuing their efforts to gain de facto control of the rural areas of Laos through their covert apparatus and the Pathet Lao.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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